

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 147 791

CS 003 836

AUTHOR Chaplin, Miriam T.
TITLE Where Do We Go From Here? Strategies for Survival of
College Reading Programs.
PUB DATE Oct 77
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
College Reading Association (21st, Cincinnati, Ohio,
October 26-29, 1977)
EDRS PRICE MF-\$0.83 HC-\$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Articulation (Program); *College Programs; Higher
Education; Program Content; *Program Coordination;
*Program Improvement; *Program Planning; *Reading
Instruction; *Reading Programs

ABSTRACT

This paper gives college reading instructors a four-part prescription to ensure the continued success of their college reading programs: Dispel the myth of remediation that separates college reading programs from traditional academic departments. Define and articulate a philosophy for reading instruction at the college level. Expand college reading programs, offering them to all students. Correlate the content of the reading program to the content in academic courses, so that the reading program reflects the demands made of students in their coursework.
(RL)

* Documents acquired by ERIC include many informal unpublished *
* materials not available from other sources. ERIC makes every effort *
* to obtain the best copy available. Nevertheless, items of marginal *
* reproducibility are often encountered and this affects the quality *
* of the microfiche and hardcopy reproductions ERIC makes available *
* via the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). EDRS is not *
* responsible for the quality of the original document. Reproductions *
* supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made from the original. *

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

Where Do We Go From Here? - Strategies for Survival of College Reading Programs

Written by:

Miriam T. Chaplin
Assistant Professor Rutgers University
311 N. 5th Street
Camden, N.J. 08102
(609) 757-6106

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS
MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Miriam T. Chaplin

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES
INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND
USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

ED147791

C5003 S36

Where Do We Go From Here? - Strategies for Survival of College Reading Programs

Within the last decade, we have witnessed a proliferation of reading courses in higher education. As colleges and universities opened their doors to students who traditionally had not entered post secondary institutions, there was a concern over the ability of these students to cope with the demands of college reading. It was believed that programs of remediation were necessary to ease the assimilation of these students into the mainstream of academic life. At the same time, the general public, largely propelled by reports in the media, became alarmed over the declining admissions tests scores of the traditional students. College Instructors in the major disciplines began to complain that generally students were not well prepared and pointed the finger of blame at the secondary and elementary schools and their permissive attitudes toward education. The establishment of reading centers or laboratories were the institutions' answer to all of these problems. However, because of the rapidity with which events occurred, reading programs were hurriedly instituted with little foresight and planning for their stability. They were simply insurance policies that protected the cherished high standards of academic excellence. Today we find that the trend of diversification in college populations has not lessened the policies and practices which seemed effective in the chaotic period of revolutionary change are no longer relevant to our needs or beneficial to our hope of sustained life. Thus, the question, "Where do we go from here?" is a reality for everyone involved in college reading. Its answer may well determine whether we flourish in the fertile fields of academe or wither and die the death of other innovations of the 1960's and early seventies.

There are four directions in which I feel we must move in order to preserve ourselves. First, I believe we must dispel the myth of remediation which

hangs heavy over our heads and separates us from traditional academic departments.

There is a prevailing notion in colleges and universities that reading is a skill that should be mastered at the elementary or secondary level. Any reading instruction at the college level is considered remedial and needed only by deficient students. This belief is antagonistic to the knowledge that has been gained about the developing process of reading proficiency and its relationship to the total pattern of cognitive, linguistic and emotional growth. All development should be viewed as a continuum with learners occupying various positions according to the experiences they have had and their ability to cognitively organize and emotionally adjust to these experiences. James Moffett refers to reading and writing as "shallow mechanical activities and deep operations of mind and spirit."¹ It is toward the latter of these that college reading instruction must be directed, for mature reading requires the use of sophisticated thought processes. These processes are not characteristic of young children. Therefore, reading instruction can begin in the elementary school, but it should continue beyond that level. The prevailing practice, however, is to reduce formal reading instruction after the mechanical skills of decoding are acquired and reading is viewed as remedial a skill in high school as it is in college. Thus, when students enter college, they are applying the skills learned in the elementary school while subject matter and performance expectations have become increasingly more difficult. Research investigations conducted by J. W. McKinnon and J. W. Renner at Oklahoma University have revealed that "college freshmen do not come to college with adequate skills to argue logically about the importance of a given principle when the content in which it is used is slightly altered."² Milton Schwebel's investigations with Rutgers students concur with their findings. According to Schwebel, many students are "lost if an author, a lecturer or a discussant fails to provide every

datum and every step in a logical process, a most unlikely condition in higher education where propositional logic is presumably the most common denominator of all activity."³ These investigations imply that the skills needed for college students to successfully comply with the demands placed upon them are unique to this level. They are not repetitions of skills that were taught at lower levels any more than are concepts covered in the disciplines of Biology, History or English. (all of which were taught in the secondary school) A college curriculum includes higher level concepts and skills which are peculiar to the content which must be covered. Therefore, learning experiences in reading, provided to enhance the growth of all students are not remedial, but developmental in the sense that movement is the sole criterion. Reading must be perceived as a necessary concomitant to all academic instruction and woven carefully into the curriculum fabric. We cannot allow ourselves, as Reading Instructors, to be seen as the persons who apply the remedial band-aid to academically wounded students. What we have to offer is more of a vitamin supplement which preserves healthy readers and helps to nourish weak ones.

Second, we must define and articulate our philosophy of reading instruction. We must explain what we mean by "Reading," for often our informed ideas are far different from the ideas of others outside our area of expertise. A stated philosophy can help others understand the complex nature of mature reading and provide us with a theoretical framework that will guide our actions.

A theory underlying reading instruction at the college level should be one of possibility rather than deficiency. Our focus must be on what students are capable of doing rather than on what they are not doing as evidenced in standardized test scores. It is difficult to determine the reading proficiency of a mature reader from a single testing because of the fluctuating nature of performance ability. Students may be able to select a main idea from a book they have chosen to read because it interests them and fail dismally to glean the

idea in an academic textbook which may be less stimulating. They may be quite efficient in detecting bias and identifying the author's tone and intent in a newspaper editorial which arouses feelings of anger, but cannot apply this same level of interpretation to a history book. Is it the skills that are deficient or is it an inflexibility in the application of skills? Since reading proficiency is relative to the complexity of the material, one's experiences and the level of cognitive functioning applied to the task at hand, what we may identify as a deficiency from a single testing may more accurately be called a lack of experience in reading the content compounded by an insufficiently developed vocabulary. Once the jargon is made comprehensible, the student may be able to engage in mental interaction with the author as the skills of comprehension are applied. A program that seeks only to eliminate deficiencies sends us into a tailspin of corrective techniques whenever a performance does not meet expectations. If, however, we build our programs on what we believe students can do and make that our starting point, we can emphasize the relevancy of skills to content. Andrew Wilkinson has wisely stated that "students will develop the skills that are needed if they are presented in "situations where they are called upon and not by special training in them."⁴ The strengths that students possess - not their deficiencies should be the keystones of college reading programs.

Third, we must make an effort whenever possible to broaden our population base so that reading is offered to all students.

In the Spring of 1977, the State Board of Higher Education in New Jersey issued a statement requiring that all students admitted for the fall semester to all public colleges and universities in the state be given a reading test. The results of the tests would determine who would be required to enroll in regular reading classes. At first, this may sound like a breakthrough for college reading instruction in New Jersey, but second thoughts quickly follow.

The implication of such a ruling may be far more serious and damaging than most people realize. While it negates the idea that only minority disadvantaged students need reading instruction, it intensifies the remedial stigma that currently surrounds the programs. More importantly, it is feared that this mandate may be the forerunner of a second one which will declare that all students who do not attain the expected cut off score will be required to enroll in two-year colleges rather than the four-year institutions. I see this as threatening to both two and four-year colleges as well as to students. First, the two-year community colleges were not designed to be dumping grounds for the cast-offs of four-year colleges; their mission is much more profound than this. Second, four-year state institutions operate on public funds and should be accessible to all people. They should not be citadels for high achieving students only. Our experiences in the last ten years have proved that some students who are considered "high risks" when they enter are often graduated at the top of their classes. No predictive index can measure the strength of human motivation and aspiration. To deny admission to students on the basis of a test score is to refuse to extend the arm of educational opportunity. An undergraduate institution should allow students to engage in a "process of becoming." If we deny access, the process for these students may never begin.

Whether our fears are justifiable is not the question. The fact that the State has accepted the responsibility for determining the student population of reading courses is serious enough without the added fears. I recognized this action as part of the "back to basics" movement. While I am not anxious to go "back" to anything, I have no quarrel with "basics" as long as we agree on what is basic to a successful college education. The "basics" of college performance in reading is the ability to interpret, analyze and synthesize the thoughts of a textbook writer with one's own ideas and experiences. One must also be able to pursue meaningful research and engage in a process of abstraction which may lead

to new ideas or a reorganization of old ideas. This must be accomplished in a variety of disciplines and in different situations. The ability to perform these tasks unfolds continuously as one participates in the process of acquiring knowledge. The skills do not reside in a cubicle of our minds waiting to be summoned when they are needed. Therefore, it is impossible to select and isolate before matriculation a population of students who need these skills more than other students. Developmental reading courses should be available to all students on a voluntary basis and offered for full academic credit. Some students may be strongly encouraged to attend, but Reading instruction should not be a penalty for having scored poorly.

But this places a great responsibility on Reading Instructors. It means that our classes will not be filled for us by the Admissions Office. We must fill them ourselves by making our courses dynamic, challenging and necessary for student success. As the rumors spread at course selection time, those rumors about us must be positive in every way. The fourth recommendation flows from this idea.

Reading instruction at the college level must be relevant to students' academic experiences and reflect an understanding of the demands that are made on students in the wider academic community.

Experiences in reading should offer students an opportunity to organize the realities that they face daily. Some of them are drowning in a sea of textbooks and assigned readings with no life rafts for survival. What they are required to read appears to bear no similarity to their life situations. If they are enrolled in a reading course which is not related to the content courses, they are further confused. Thus, the content of reading must be the content of the disciplines. However, it is not the product of knowledge that is our concern, but the process through which knowledge is acquired. When students' textbooks are used as vehicles for developing an increased awareness of reading

to new ideas or a reorganization of old ideas. This must be accomplished in a variety of disciplines and in different situations. The ability to perform these tasks unfolds continuously as one participates in the process of acquiring knowledge. The skills do not reside in a cubicle of our minds waiting to be summoned when they are needed. Therefore, it is impossible to select and isolate before matriculation a population of students who need these skills more than other students. Developmental reading courses should be available to all students on a voluntary basis and offered for full academic credit. Some students may be strongly encouraged to attend, but Reading instruction should not be a penalty for having scored poorly.

But this places a great responsibility on Reading Instructors. It means that our classes will not be filled for us by the Admissions Office. We must fill them ourselves by making our courses dynamic, challenging and necessary for student success. As the rumors spread at course selection time, those rumors about us must be positive in every way. The fourth recommendation flows from this idea.

Reading instruction at the college level must be relevant to students' academic experiences and reflect an understanding of the demands that are made on students in the wider academic community.

Experiences in reading should offer students an opportunity to organize the realities that they face daily. Some of them are drowning in a sea of textbooks and assigned readings with no life rafts for survival. What they are required to read appears to bear no similarity to their life situations. If they are enrolled in a reading course which is not related to the content courses, they are further confused. Thus, the content of reading must be the content of the disciplines. However, it is not the product of knowledge that is our concern, but the process through which knowledge is acquired. When students' textbooks are used as vehicles for developing an increased awareness of reading

skills, an immediate application is possible and the need to transfer skills is eliminated. Moreover, the student realizes the relationship of process to product and is able to place what is read in proper perspective. Creative kinds of approaches should be used which give life to subject matter and encourages students to manipulate the ideas behind the written work so that they can have personal meaning. This cannot be easily accomplished in a reading laboratory that utilizes prescription sheets, pre-digested exercises or performance contracts. Group transactions that provide a means whereby individuals can organize experiences in the process of sharing reactions to printed stimuli or in the solution of verbal problems is a more feasible approach to take. In this setting, creativity and productivity emanate directly from the ability of group members to think logically and objectively about the ideas encountered in communication.

On the other hand, it cannot be denied that reading is a personal and private experience as well. It occurs with a spatial separation between writers and readers. Thus, the readers are left with their own devices for interpreting the message. The readers can search for the meaning they think a professor will accept as a correct answer or they can interpret the text to meet personal expectations and satisfactions. Realistically, both kinds of interpretations are necessary at the college level. The task of the Reading Instructor is to help readers understand that the written word is not a given, but a reality over which they have exclusive control. It can be broadened, shortened and applied to various circumstances. Once the author has released his work for publication, it belongs to the world. Copyright laws will protect its duplication, but nothing can protect its interpretation. In an atmosphere which promotes freedom of interpretation, there is no answer sheet, for the answers are all different. But somewhere in the maze of interpretations may lie some creative and challenging ideas. If we can create this kind of dynamic relationship between thought and word in the minds of students, they can get off the perpetual

merry-go-round of searching for the correct answer. Our classrooms will be full, for what can be found in a course called "Reading" will be the shot in the arm which makes the academic trip not only bearable, but exciting.

There is another factor, however, which must be considered. It is necessary for Reading Instructors to develop some kind of coordination with Instructors in the academic disciplines, for we must be aware of the demands that are placed on students in these courses. All of our efforts toward improving the ability of students to use new strategies and techniques will be futile if we isolate ourselves from those who hold the academic destiny of students in their hands. We must know how Instructors plan their courses, what kinds of assignments are given and their expectations for student performance. As we open channels of communication, we are weaving process and product together into a curriculum chain with no weak links. Moreover, we are making ourselves visible and audible. Most college reading programs are still in the early stages of growth. Like the young child we must be curious, energetic and willing to take the hand of more mature colleagues as we search for better ways to meet the needs and aspirations of students.

We stand on the brink of an uncertain future. The institution has given us birth. We must now concentrate on life sustaining strategies which will lead to longevity.

Notes

1. James Moffett. Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968, p. 12.
2. J. W. McKinnon and John W. Renner. "Are Colleges Concerned with Intellectual Development?" American Journal of Physics 39, September, 1971, p. 1047.
3. U. S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Office of Education, Washington, D. C.: Bureau of Research (Grant No. OEG-7-00399509), April, 1972. Logical Thinking in College Freshmen by Milton Schwebel.
4. Andrew Wilkinson. "Oracy in English Teaching" in Johanna S. deStefano and Sharon E. Fox. Language and the Language Arts (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1974)., p. 65.